

The Flag Incident

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"A single month of hardship was worth the extra dash of trust that surviving would earn her, the better reach she would have to slit her mother's throat, the passion and intensity that her return would awaken in her crew." Pirates and mermaids AU. SatsuMako

Status: ongoing

Published: 2014-05-01

Words: 1447

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Romance -
Characters: [Satsuki K., Mako M.] - Reviews: 4 - Favs: 7 - Follows: 9

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10314112/1/The-Flag-Incident>

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Her crew kneeled before her captors, her most trusted with grimy boots jammed into their backs and swords pressed into their throats. She too found herself at the business end of one, though she had the courtesy of being held submissive by someone of equal rank. The storm rocked their ships with impunity, the waves so dark that only the bright forks of lightning lancing through the sky could render them translucent.

"Satsuki, long time no see, hm?" Nui said. "It's almost a pity we have to reunite like this."

"What do you want?" Satsuki spat. "Or what does mother want?"

Nui rolled her eyes and spoke in a rough imitation of Satsuki's voice, "Don't you have time for pleasantries? Or has the life of a pirate made you forget the finer points of your station?" The sweet smile she flashed at her clashed terribly with it. "See I can demand the answers too! It's fun. I can see why you bark them out all day long."

"The questions stand."

"Oh, very well." She paced lightly before her, the point of her sword still steady against her jugular. "I'm uncertain as to how loyally you're running *Instinct*," she said. "I mean, yes you've brought in countless treasures and numerous moldable souls into Lady Ragyo's armada, and *Instinct* and her captain are certainly feared on a visceral level."

"It sounds like I'm doing more than what needs to be done to further her empire."

"Yes, it would seem so yes. But it begs the question."

Satsuki waited for her to get to her point. After a moment a wet piece of cloth fell from the main mast behind Nui, and the blonde bent and

picked it up almost daintily in her free hand. After a moment it became clear.

"Why do you have your own flag? Isn't Ragyo's enough for you?" She dragged the offensive article along the wet and dirtied deck. Off to the side, Gamagoori clenched his jaw at the blatant disrespect, but Satsuki willed him to do no more for the sake of keeping his makeshift collar of swords from tightening.

"I fly it under hers, don't I?" Satsuki replied evenly, brushing debris from her coat. "I don't see a problem. One day-may that day be many years off-the armada will fall under my command and with it my flag will rise. I'm establishing my presence; I find that pirates and royal navies alike have a poor palate for nepotism. I understand that you don't have to worry about such things, but someone in my position must always consider the future."

"It sounds like you're distancing yourself from her," said Nui, ignoring the subtle jab at her own exhausted career opportunities. "Your own ambition makes you seem very disloyal to your mother. Her flag should be good enough. Her flag should be carried on for as long as there is a single ship that sails with her guidance. Her flag will see you into power, if that day ever comes."

Nui lowered the sword and five more sprung up its place to keep her in check. The buttons of Satsuki's long white and blue coat came undone with haste, and though she wanted otherwise, she allowed Nui to slip it off of her shoulders. She plucked the hat off of her head as well and handed both off to a thug with the cleanest hands.

"My coat won't fit you, I'm afraid," she said. Satsuki was already soaked through to the bone, but she ignored the small discomfort.

"Oh silly, I know that. And don't you worry; we'll take good care of both of them. Iori's work is much too precious to ruin without cause. Well, not as precious as mine, of course, but he is the silver to my gold."

"What is your aim, Nui?"

Humming softly to herself, Nui draped the white flag around Satsuki's shoulders as if bestowing a particularly heavy and cumbersome cape upon her, adjusting the weight of it so that the yellow four-pointed star sprawled up the right side of Satsuki's body. "Lady Ragyo isn't quite as concerned as I am, so she left me in charge of rectifying the situation," she said as she tucked the edges through Satsuki's belt. "Think of this following month as a surprise test and not as a punishment."

"Is this truly mother's will?" Satsuki asked. Whatever Nui had in mind already tasted sour to her and she couldn't even begin to fathom what it might be. She scanned the faces of her four mates, her armorer, her attendant, and her cabin girl, found them all contorted in rage made all the more potent by their helplessness. She couldn't blame them. If she had known this wouldn't be a friendly visit, she would've urged them north with the winds, where Nui had less power.

"Of course it's her will." Happy with her work, she sheathed her own sword only to pull Satsuki's from her hip. Bakuzan's edge caught the dim lantern light in such a way it looked spiteful. "I would go along with it if I were you. The sooner this is over, the sooner you can have *Instinct* back... and the less you put up a fight, the more likely it is you will have *all* of your crew returned unscathed..."

Satsuki felt the plank sliding into place behind her. "You mean to strand me for a month then? We're in open water."

"A month starting from sunrise, to be exact. Whether you get to even see that sunrise is alone going to be a testament to your strength of will and tenacity, but let's not get too ahead of ourselves." She locked arms with Satsuki and guided her onto the plank, not at all perturbed that the two of them couldn't even dream of walking abreast upon it. At the last moment she forced Satsuki slightly ahead of her with a soft giggle. "We will allow your crew will find you when the allotted time has passed. Your flag won't make it one way or

another, of course. But if you should perish, it will serve to identify your corpse and spread a nice succinct message to those who fear you in place of Lady Ragyo."

"What would she think of you if your 'test' should be the death of me, Nui? The death of her only living daughter will not sit well, I would imagine."

Nui's brief silence at her second jab was more than satisfying.

"If being cast overboard and stranded for thirty pitiful days is enough to do you in, then you're not worthy of your claim to Lady Ragyo's blood and the station she's granted you. Simple as that." She advanced, Bakuzan's tip pressed against her shoulder blade. Through the flag and her clothes, Satsuki felt it draw blood. With a sigh she pressed forward to the edge of the plank at her own pace, not giving Nui the satisfaction of bowing to her urgency. "As for me, she'll thank me for pruning you from the family tree... or for proving how steely your spirit is and loyal you actually are to her. I win either way."

Satsuki looked out on the black waves and starless night as regret welled like bile in her throat. Before it could sting in her eyes and in her cheeks, she swallowed it down, her determination and pride hateful of the momentary weakness. It was only a month. A single month of hardship was worth the extra dash of trust that surviving would earn her, the better reach she would have to slit her mother's throat, the passion and intensity that her return would awaken in her crew. There was nothing to regret. She could wallow in it when she could no longer adapt.

She turned with the signature tap of her heel and summoned the inner light to fully illuminate these two bleak ships.

"MY CREW, LISTEN TO M-"

Bakuzan slid into the middle of the yellow star and out between the sliver of space between her shoulder blade and spine until the guard

pins collided with ribs. Her light flickered and died. Nonon cried out her name loud enough that Satsuki could hear her over her own strangled scream.

"Shut up," hissed Nui.

Satsuki's knees went weak. She stammered around a word-an accusation, a curse, something-but she couldn't breathe. Nui held fast to Bakuzan, and even through the forks of pain slamming across her nerves, the girl's enjoyment was palpable.

Suddenly, she was falling. There was more yelling and screaming, the sound of the storm raging, the sound of half-mad laughter.

Then nothing.